

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PURIM EDITION*

Zachor: The Dark Side of Purim

Parshat Titzaveh Exodus 27:20 – 30:10

Shabbat Zachor Deuteronomy 25:17-16/ I Samuel 15:2-34

Purim By Rabbi Alan Lucas, Pages 195-202

Torah Table Talk is sponsored by Rabbi Mark Greenspan
In honor of all the children at OJC!

I. Introduction

Despite the levity and joy associated with this season, Purim is a dark holiday. This feast is framed by the observance of *Shabbat Zachor* just before Purim. We are commanded to remember Amalek's genocidal attempt to destroy the people of Israel shortly after they left Egypt. The Torah commands us to remember and never forget what Amalek did "to you by the way, when you came forth out of Egypt..." We are told to "blot out" the remembrance of this nation for all generations. Haman, of course, is a descendent of Agag and the ancient Amalekites. We take the Torah at its word and literally try to blot out the name of Haman by making noise whenever his name is read from the *Megillah*.

Purim and Shabbat Zachor are not without their problematic side. Commenting on Saul's war against Amalek Michael Fishbane writes in his commentary: "The reader is confronted with the austerity and stringency of God's demands and the brutality demanded of the Israelite nation. Mercy is prohibited; no one and nothing may be "spared." The war against Amalek is presented as a "just war" punishing an offense centuries old. Rejection and reinterpretation of the absolute orders is completely out of the question. Whether an actual event or as a literary case setting an example, I Samuel 15:1-34 confronts us with a fierce and uncompromising theology. Its liturgical recitation yearly requires repeated moral and theological reflection."

Deuteronomy 25:17-19: Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came forth out of Egypt; how he met you by the way, and struck at your rear, all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and did not fear God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget it.

I Samuel 15:1-3, 9: Samuel also said to Saul, The Lord sent me to anoint you to be king over his people, over Israel; now therefore listen to the voice of the words of the Lord. 2. Thus said the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. 3. And go and strike Amalek, and completely destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay man and woman, infant and suckling, ox, and sheep, camel and ass...9. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen,

II. Sources and Resources

- a) Amalek came and fought with Israel at Riphidim. Moses said to Joshua: "Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek...and Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword. Then Adonai said to Moses, "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder and read it aloud to Joshua: 'I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!'" And Moses built an altar and named it *Adonai Nisi*. He said: "Hand upon the throne of God! *Adonai* will be at war with Amalek through the ages. (*Exodus 17:8-16*)
- b) A homiletical comment suggests that sometimes Amalek is a mad dog, attacking without provocation. In those cases, God says, "I will deal with him." At times, however, Amalek is like a fly, appearing only where dirt and filth are. In those cases, The Torah says, "You blot out his memory," (Deut. 25:19) by cleaning up the corruption that attracts him. We are commanded to combat Amalek in every generation even as we wait for God to eradicate Amalek entirely. (*Etz Hayim Torah Commentary, page 421*)

- c) After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. (*Esther 3:1*)
- d) **Sometime afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him:** the king ordered all to bow down and prostrate themselves before him. What did Haman do? He attached and embroidered image to his garment upon his breast and everyone who bowed down to Haman bowed to the image. (*Esther Rabbah 7:6*)

Why do you disobey the king's order: What did Mordecai say to those who asked him: "Why do you disobey the king's order?" Rabbi Levi said: He said to them: 'Our master Moses admonished us in the Torah, saying, 'Cursed be the man that makes a graven or a molten image' (Deuteronomy 27:15); and this wretch sets himself up as a deity. Isaiah the prophet admonished us, 'Oh, cease to glorify man, who only has a breath in his nostrils. For by what does he merit esteem?' (Isaiah 2:22) What is more, I am the elect of the Holy One since all the tribes were born outside the holy land, but my ancestors were born in the land of Israel (Mordecai was a descendent of the tribe of Levi)." They said to him, 'Then we shall tell Haman this.' So they went and "they told Haman," Haman said to them, "Say to him, 'Did not his ancestors prostrate himself before my ancestor (Haman was a descendent of Esau), as it says, "then the handmaids came near, they and their children, and they bowed down...and after came Joseph near and Rachel and they bowed down.'" (Ge. 33:6f.) Mordecai replied, "Benjamin was not yet born." (*Esther Rabbah 7:8*)

- e) *Zachor* is a *Mitzvah* that has made modern Jews uncomfortable. The natural desire to forget and be happy collides with the ongoing pain of memory and analysis. When asked why President Ronald Reagan in 1985 initially declined to visit the Dachau concentration camp, a presidential aide explained that the president was an 'up' type of person who did not like to "grovel in a grisly thing." The primary lesson of *Parshat Zachor* is that true reconciliation comes through repentance and remembrance. Confronting the evils of the past is the most powerful generator of moral cleansing and fundamental reconciliation. Repentance is the key to overcoming the evils of the past....Remembrance is the key to preventing recurrence. (*Rabbi Irving Greenberg, The Jewish Way: Living the Jewish Holidays*)

III. Reflections

Shabbat Zachor is one of four special Sabbaths which precede the celebration of Passover. It occurs in the month of Adar on the Shabbat before Purim. The only section of the Torah that we are biblically mandated to read publicly, Deuteronomy, Chapter 25, contains the commandment to destroy the nation of Amalek which attacked the Israelites after leaving the land of Egypt. The Amalekites were a nation of terrorists, of sorts; they purposely attacked the nation from behind so that they could kill the stragglers and the weakest people as they traveled through the desert. The special Haftorah which we read on *Shabbat Zachor* concerns the failure of Saul, the first king of Israel to fulfill the divine mandate to destroy Amalek. Saul and his men destroy the 'cheap and the worthless' but kept sheep, oxen and lambs, and worst of all, allowed Agog, the king of Amalek, to live. As a result of this infraction, the monarchy would be taken from Saul's progeny.

What are we to do with the story of Saul and the Amalekites, or the commandment, for that matter, to blot out and destroy this nation? The Bible goes far beyond self defense; it declares a holy war against this nation for all time. Despite repeated attempts by Saul to apologize and acknowledge his failure to carry out God's command, God is uncompromising. Saul cannot be forgiven; he has failed as a leader and cannot pass on the monarchy to his family.

It is not uncommon for Jewish people to make a connection between the nation of Amalek and the villains who have sought to destroy us throughout the ages: Nebuchadnezer, Antiochus, Titus, Hadrian, Torquemada, Chelmnitzky, and Hitler and Eichmann and others. But I wonder if this is a healthy response to our enemies over the ages. Where does one draw the line in making such associations? And does Amalek open the door as a justification for genocide, particularly at a time when Jews have the power to carry guns and form an army. On the other hand, the reality of Jewish suffering is constantly before us. We must be vigilant in speaking out against racism, intolerance and hate.

It's no wonder, then, that some people have chosen to see Amalek not only as an external foe but an internal enemy who emerges when we fail. Remembering Amalek is not just a matter of self- defense; it serves as a warning about what we should never become.

Questions to Ponder

1. The Bible draws a line of connection between Amalek, Agog and Haman. Do you believe that there is a historic, ideological, culture connection between hatred of Jews throughout the ages?
2. Why is the Torah so much harsher in its dealings with the Amalekites than it is in dealing with other nations? We are told not to hate the Egyptians because we were strangers in their land but we are told that our enmity for the Amalekites shall last forever. Is it appropriate to hold on to a grudge?
3. Read the rest of today's Haftorah about Saul and Samuel. Do you think that Samuel received a "bum rap?" What other factors might have motivated the prophet to give such a harsh judgment of the first king of Israel? What could you say in defense of Saul?
4. The *Midrash* adds another dimension to the story of Purim that is quite unexpected. Why do the sages suggest that Haman tried to get the Jews to bow down to an idol? How else does Haman justify asking the Jews to bow to him? What questions is the *Midrash* trying to answer?
5. Greenberg writes that losing our memory condemns us to repeat past errors. Americans, he writes, have short memories. Is it possible that Jewish people have memories that are too long and unforgiving? Should we associate past and present foes with our primordial enemies, like the Amalekites?

Torah Table Talk – The Observant Life

Date, 2013	Parshah	Topic for discussion
March 2	Ki Tisa	Shabbat page 98ff
March 9	Vayakhel-Pekudei	Synagogue Life page 61ff

Don't depend on the quotes from The Observant Life in Torah Table Talk. Get a copy and read the whole chapter! It is also available on Kindle and Nook. Would you consider becoming a sponsor for TTT for a week, a month, for a whole book of the Torah or for an entire year? Weekly sponsorships are \$54. Dedications can be made in memory of loved ones or in honor of special occasions on the week of your choice. All donations will be used to support the Oceanside Jewish Center, my congregational sponsor. For more information or if to subscribe to or unsubscribe from Torah Table Talk, write to haravmark@optonline.net. Rabbi Mark Greenspan

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

Copyright 2013 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan